

Beyond Words

Students
embrace
new
languages
and
cultures

by Maj. Kimberly Tebrugge
photos by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

One of the most effective tools in breaking barriers between nations isn't something you hold in your hands. But every deploying Airman should pack it in their rucksack — an open mind. This means having the ability to absorb and comprehend new cultures. Listening to words, catching the tension, questions or compassion in another's voice. And, perceiving body language and communicating with the people living in the numerous countries Airmen have become immersed in over the past several years.

The Defense Language Institute located at Presidio of Monterey, Calif., cultivates an environment for open minds. Here, 3,500 active-duty and Reserve students from all four services explore their own personal journey toward understanding foreign languages and ideas.

Arabic, Russian, Korean, Persian-Farsi and Chinese are just a few of the 26 languages taught. Course durations range from two-week refreshers to a full 18-months. But regardless of the course, a strong sense of open-mindedness prevails.

Another world

"People everywhere are essentially the same. They may be called by different names but our values ... our family life is essentially the same," said Airman 1st Class Jakob Hall. After basic training, the 23-year-old arrived at the school for a crash course in Pashtu, the official language of Afghanistan. A self-described 'country redneck' from conservative East Texas, Airman Hall considers it "a big step out" just coming to California. To then focus on a language and people from the other side of the world is even more bizarre.

For the past 40 weeks, Airman hall has learned to write, read, speak and understand an increasing amount of the language. In a typical day he spends six hours in a classroom. He has an immense respect for his professors.

Graduates of the Defense Language Institute hone their skills to speak, listen, read and write new languages to support worldwide operations as linguists or international specialists. Airman 1st Class Richard Moon, left, spends much of his day listening to the Pashtu language. Airman 1st Class John Cirillo, right, practices Arabic, one of the many languages taught at DLI, by describing about the friendship he shares with his sister.

"I think each of our four teachers have at one time, over the last 20 years, been imprisoned, mostly by the Taliban," he said.

In addition to learning about the language, Airman Hall is learning about the people — their intense love for family; their extreme hospitality and generosity; and how they tolerate destitution or hunger but can't accept even the hint of insult.

"It puts a special place in our hearts for the people," the future linguist admits.

In the evenings, he spends an additional two to three hours doing homework. The schedule is relentless. When talking to his wife, he

sometimes forgets himself and speaks Pashtu, expecting her to understand.

He's not the only one who finds it tough. Airman 1st Class John Cirillo, an Arabic student, is single and lives in the dorms. He finds the schedule just as demanding. Armed with an intelligent expression and rimless glasses, he looks more like a doctoral student than a first-term Airman.

"We learned to write the entire 26-letter Arabic alphabet in the first eight days of class," he recalls.

There are days when he thinks his brain won't absorb one more

vocabulary word, but his instructors warned him about "plateauing," and he finds solace in knowing it's a normal process he must push through.

The Airman said, "just having an open mind and realizing this is just the genesis of my experience" helps him cope.

"Our instructors told us to think of ourselves like 5-year-olds, and when we graduate, we'll almost be 8th graders," he said.

It's a blend of humility and determination. Students are continuously tested throughout their DLI training and must achieve a high level of proficiency to graduate.

"I've always had a passion for learning languages ... so it makes it that much easier to do my job," Airman Hall said.

But in the last Pashtu class, only two of the 15 students passed on the first try. He only has seven more weeks until he tests to graduate and feels the pressure. For Airman Hall, it's not just a test of his skill, it's a right of passage into his new career where he hopes to play a part in changing the world.

"It really moves me to try to help these people, to better their situation, that [our instructors] can go back there one day without fear of being killed," he said with an air of seriousness.

The evolution

The training environment has constantly evolved since the school held its first class November 1, 1941, teaching 60 students (mostly Nisei, or second-generation Japanese-Americans) in an abandoned hangar.

Thanks to a well-funded program, they are able to make classes smaller (6 to 8 student) for increased one-on-one time for students and instructors. Almost every instructor is a native speaker of the language they teach, and they are carefully selected for diversity in age, gender and nationality to offer varying perspectives. Many have experienced a world ravaged by violence between countries or political factions, and consider their time with students as a contribution to world peace. Instruction goes far beyond harping on grammar skills.

"Arabic and culture go hand in hand, one is an umbrella under the other. To understand the language you have to go back to the culture and see how the word was first used," says Bashar Masri, a DLI Arabic instructor for two years. "We begin with someone who doesn't know how to say 'hi' in Arabic, and in the end we are



Mr. Bashar Masri prepares material to teach his Arabic language students. As one of the younger professors, he offers "new blood" to the school. He uses textbooks, newspapers, music, films and television to offer diverse but relevant cultural and linguistic exposure to Arabic-speaking countries.



Airman Callie Anthony studies Farsi in the dorm room she shares with another student. On learning a foreign language, "You really have to want to do it, and be organized." She said her strong southern accent doesn't keep her from having an excellent Farsi pronunciation.



During a Korean class outing, Airman 1st Class William Nash (center), samples some of the many types of Korean food offered at the Han Kook Super Market in Sunnyvale, Calif. The region surrounding the language school is conveniently international.

discussing the political situations in Iraq.”

Mr. Masri, 27, is the average age of most of his students. He attended a U.S. university and talks to his students using colloquialisms they understand. They respectfully call him Ustath, or professor. But mutual respect, even friendship, grows during their 63 weeks together.

“I treat them as my friends, and they treat me like a friend who knows more about Arabic than they do,” Mr. Masri said. He often knows what questions students will ask as soon as they raise their hands, because he considers what he would ask if he were them.

As students compare and contrast aspects of American culture with those of another country, a shift in thinking away from the differences in food, language or dress begins to highlight the similarities of how people of other cultures think, feel and live.

Mr. Masri watches his students dissolve stereotypes as even apparently drastic differences became smaller within the context of understanding.

He says that in Arab-speaking countries, if someone comments that he admires his friend’s jacket, social customs lead the friend to remove his jacket and give it to his friend

as a gift, on the spot. Even if it’s the only jacket he owns.

A foreign concept to Americans, to some it may seem overly presumptuous, bordering on absurd. But an increased understanding of the Arab people clarifies and suggests a response to what could otherwise be an uncomfortable situation.

“The person should explain that while they might want to give the guy his jacket, he needs it to perform his duty and he cannot offer it,” Mr. Masri advises if an Airman were complimented on their uniform jacket. “This offers a polite way out and shows an understanding.”

Bridge between nations

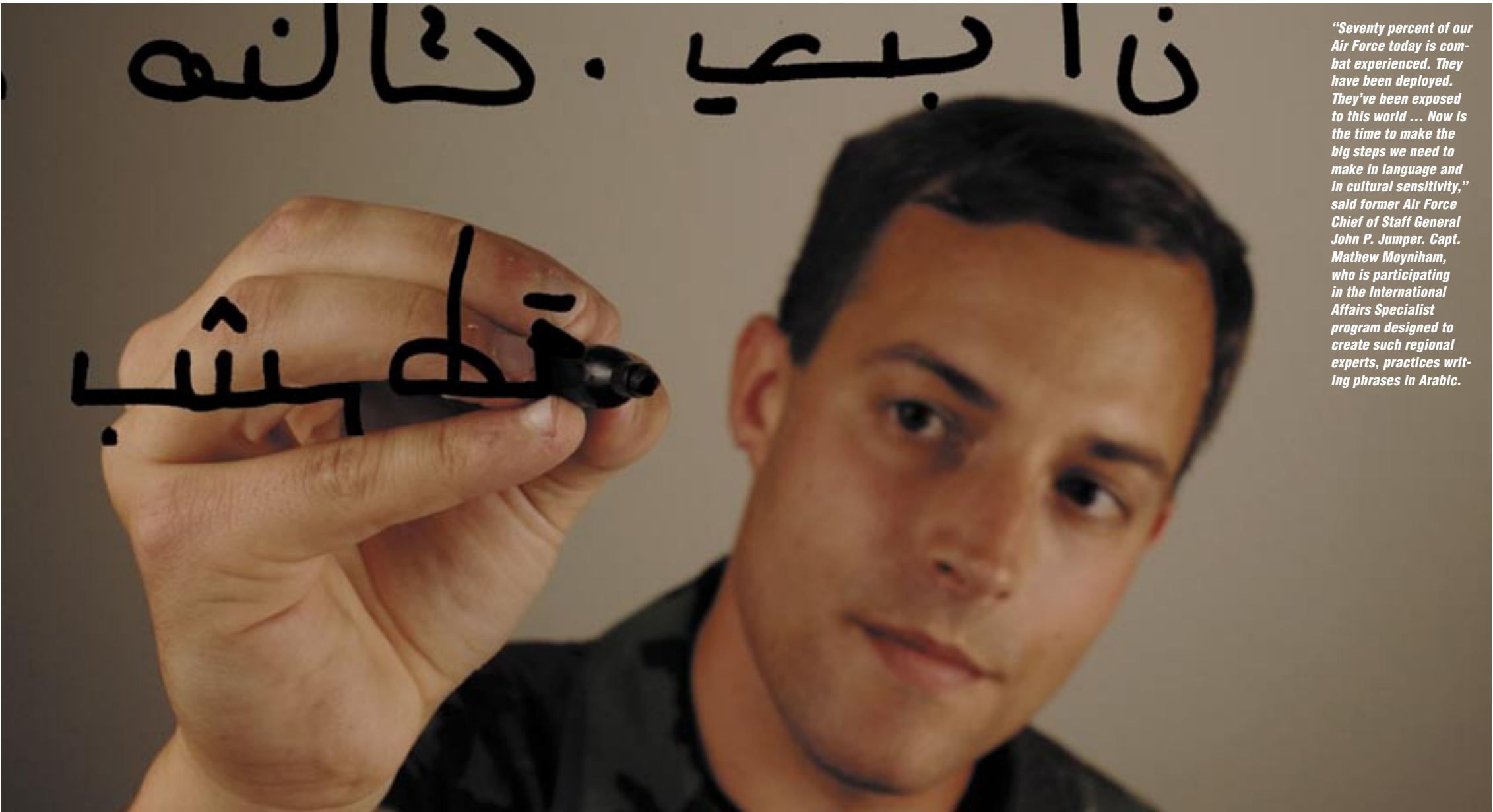
While DLI provides the environment and tools each student needs to gain a deeper understanding of a language and culture, each student personally makes the information intrinsic and decides what to do with their new skills.

Students say they often feel a deep respect for the people who speak the language and live in the countries they study. From the bedrock of respect and the stepping stones of language and cultural insight, a natural path is worn toward true understanding. These linguists-in-training know speaking a foreign language can take them to the forefront of world events. But true understanding begins by first appreciating a new language and the people who speak it. Then, becoming conscious of one’s own culture in context with the rest of the world. In the end, they will act as the bridge that connects these two different ways of life. 🌉

Beyond DLI

After a year or more of language school (course length varies based on the difficulty of the language), linguists attend year-long intelligence training at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas. Next, they attend the 2-and-a-half week Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape course at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash. Finally, they receive their specialized training as either aircrew or ground linguists and settle at their respective bases.

What begins as limited language ability becomes limitless over the course of a career. Linguists spend four hours a week refreshing and advancing their language studies and take intensive refresher courses. DLI offers recurring training through videoteleconference, brings former students back to the school, and sends DLI instructors out to necessary bases on a full- or part-time basis. The school also sponsors language courses online through the Air Force Portal (<https://www.my.af.mil/iaw/IAW/language> and click on Rosetta Stone), available to former students and all interested military officers. They hope to expand the contract to include all interested Airmen in the future.



“Seventy percent of our Air Force today is combat experienced. They have been deployed. They’ve been exposed to this world ... Now is the time to make the big steps we need to make in language and in cultural sensitivity,” said former Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. Jumper. Capt. Mathew Moynihan, who is participating in the International Affairs Specialist program designed to create such regional experts, practices writing phrases in Arabic.

An International Affairs Specialists broaden minds and careers

by Maj. Kimberly Tebrugge
photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

The Air Force maintains a global presence with more than 21 percent of its members stationed at 14 overseas locations, and members deployed to every continent. To be effective and considerate guests in our host nations, cultural understanding is crucial, foreign language proficiency is a huge plus and an understanding of world affairs quickly proves ignorance isn’t bliss.

In the past, the Air Force selected officers with such international awareness and skills for the Foreign Area Officer program. Today, a more proactive approach targets competitive senior captains and majors for the International Affairs Specialist program. If selected, they are offered an internationally-focused advanced degree and attend language training at the Defense Language Institute located at Presidio of Monterey, Calif.

During subsequent assignments, they will employ their language skills and experience to help pursue regional stability and contribute to multi-national operations.

“International Affairs Specialists provide deeper understanding of factors influencing nations or groups that threaten U.S. interests while enhancing the effectiveness of U.S. forces partnering with multi-cultural coalition forc-

es,” said Deputy Undersecretary of the Air Force Bruce Lemkin, who provides policy oversight and guidance for international programs supporting national security objectives. “The goal is to create a true regional expert.”

Capt. Mike Murphy, a communications officer, is currently studying Arabic at DLI. He entered the program as a foreign area officer and graduated from the Navy Post Graduate School in Monterey last year. His interest in foreign affairs was heightened while stationed in Germany, where he saw the vast difference a small amount of effort or interest in a foreign culture makes to a host nation.

“If you make an effort to understand another culture, it’s so much easier to make headway [in the mission],” he said.

A transformation of the Foreign Area Officer program, the IAS program broadens career experiences through demanding international and political-military assignments, as opposed to cross-training into a distinctly new career field.

Approximately 75 percent of IAS assignments are joint duty and 50 percent of the assignments are overseas assisting embassies, combatant commands and regional major commands with significant opportunities remaining within the United States.

Interested officers should submit a transitional officer development plan to their primary career field assignments team, expressing desire for IAS development. 🌉

International Affairs Specialist program follows two tracks

1. Regional Affairs Strategists spend three years earning a regionally-oriented graduate degree through the Naval Post-graduate School, followed by language training at the Defense Language Institute. Following training, they will alternate assignments between their primary career field and RAS opportunities.

2. Political-Military Affairs Strategists earn an international affairs-related degree in one year at through Air Command and Staff College or NPS. They develop broader, less specialized skills, gaining an advanced awareness of the international context in which the United States applies air and space power. Selection for this track occurs in conjunction with Intermediate Developmental Education, typically around the 10-
- 12 year commissioned service point. Regardless of the track, international affairs specialists’ careers are carefully managed to remain competitive in their primary career fields.

For more information, check out their Web site at <https://www.my.af.mil/iaw/iaw> through Air Force Portal.